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Negative Bias on the Military Presence Topic: Why It's Still Hard to be Aff

by Jon Voss

Switch-sides debate is an excellent educational model—forcing debaters to defend both sides of a given resolution produces a cohesive form of education far superior to unwavering assertions about one's pre-determined convictions. Pedagogical benefits aside, however, there are competitive advantages and disadvantages to defending each side of the resolution—in debates, we commonly hear that “the affirmative has infinite preparation time” and “the negative has the block.” But is this really the extent of “side bias” in Policy Debate today? A statistical analysis of the results from Tournament of Champions qualifying tournaments on the “military presence” topic suggests otherwise.

When brainstorming with students and colleagues about potential topics for this article, “this topic is a lot better for the aff (than for the negative)” was a common assertion. Admittedly, without knowing the numbers, I felt like the affirmative was probably winning as many or more debates as the negative. My first run through the data confirmed that this season has been close to even. This season, the negative has won only 51% of preliminary debates at octafinal, quarterfinal, and semifinal-level Tournament of Champions qualifying tournaments¹—a stark decline from the 2009-2010 numbers.

However, preliminary rounds probably aren't a fair test of the topic's side bias—in preliminary rounds, the number of variables in play prevent the accurate decoding of said data. Elimination rounds, on the other hand, seem to be at least a better measure of the topic's leaning—the teams in elimination debates are of comparable skill levels; elim debates are judged by a panel; and new negative strategies are most often deployed in elimination debates. The negative has won 58% of elimination round debates at the nation's most competitive invitationals. More striking still, 79% of elimination round upsets—debates in which a lower-seeded team defeated a team seeded higher after preliminary debates—have been decided in favor of the negative.

These numbers are troubling to me, and I imagine that they are surprising and concerning to debaters, coaches, and friends of the activity alike. One of the great benefits of debate is the ability of either team to win on either side of the resolution, despite the personal feelings of the adjudicator and/or the “objective truth” of the matter. Unfortunately, it seems that competitive equity is in grave danger of becoming a relic of the past—at the 2010 Tournament of Champions, 65% of the elimination round ballots were awarded to the negative. There are assuredly a

¹ The following tournament results were included in tabulation: Greenhill, St. Mark's, University of Michigan, Grapevine, Wake Forest, New Trier, University of Southern California, the Meadows School, West Des Moines Valley, Bronx, and Iowa Caucus.

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multitude of phenomena that could be attributed to the recent and drastic shift in side bias. However, I submit to you that identifying and resolving three crises in Policy Debate—the lack of comparative internal link assessment, the proliferation of multiple conditional advocacies, and an affirmative unwillingness to talk about the case—will go a long way toward bridging the gap.

Speaking generally, the 1AC’s presentation of the case includes two or three advantages with exceptional internal link evidence. While this may not have been true on some topics in recent memory (the “social services” and “public health assistance” resolutions come to mind), few topics provide the affirmative with the quality of 1AC internal link evidence that exists for America’s military presence in Japan, South Korea, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iraq, and/or Kuwait. Especially in the context of Afghanistan, South Korea, and Japan, the number of qualified authors who write compelling and well-warranted pieces of affirmative evidence that a reduction in military presence is necessary to preserve hegemony or diffuse regional tensions is unparalleled vis-à-vis recent debate topics. Unfortunately, the burden of providing high-quality internal link evidence is not reciprocal—at least not anymore. Too often, the negative gets away with asserting that the discussion of a single policy option is vital to the overall health of the US-NATO alliance, or that an insignificant piece of legislation is the lynchpin of

curing the world’s problems. Does the negative have internal link evidence to support these claims? Usually, yes. But does negative internal link evidence rise to the level of excellence established by the affirmative? In most cases, the answer is *no*. The problem is that until the community develops a higher standard for awarding internal link arguments in the negative’s favor, there’s no incentive for negative teams to pursue superior evidence. Affirmative teams need to do a much better job identifying and making arguments about low-probability, poorly-evidenced internal link chains. Judges can help to ease the transition back toward competitive equity by increasing their standard for what constitutes an internal link and (if they’re not already) becoming more receptive of affirmative internal link presses.

While an increase in judge receptiveness to defensive affirmative arguments would help to bridge the gap, it’s important to understand the ways in which the structural flexibility frequently afforded to the negative prevents affirmative teams from making their best arguments. Negative terrorism—a term coined by The 3NR’s Scott Phillips to reference instances where the 1NC contains multiple conditional and strategically-distinct options—has made being affirmative harder than ever. Terrorizing 1NC strategies detract from the focus of the 1AC, prevent the 2AC from even reasonably predicting what the 2NR will choose to go for, and ensure that only the fastest second

affirmative speakers can make all of the arguments necessary for the different 1NC positions. Though increased evidence accessibility and disclosure are on-balance extremely positive developments for the activity, one of the few drawbacks is that earlier access to more information makes it easier to be negative—a driven debater now has the ability to read every article that is used in the 1AC before the debate and find the most strategic location from which to attack the case. This evolution in negative strategizing *alone* makes it hard to be affirmative. When compounded with a judge acceptance and negative deployment of *multiple* hard-to-predict strategies in the *same* round, it becomes almost impossible to consistently win affirmative ballots against similarly-skilled opponents. The common counterclaim to the aforementioned argument is that “the deployment of several conditional negative strategies is a superior educational model that allows the negative to ‘test the aff from multiple levels’”—but the process of *researching* the affirmative case outside of the debate round (what some have called “pre-round conditionality”) seems to be a fair way to allow the negative to examine all aspects of the case while still giving the affirmative team a fighting chance. To be clear, this is not an argument against conditionality as a meta-level model for debate—but rather a plea for a return to a form of logical, limited conditionality that allows the affirmative to compete

on a level playing field. Here again, judges and affirmative teams have a role to play in resolving negative terrorism. Affirmative teams need to take the first step and more willingly throw the challenge flag when the negative is cheating—more than just reading the 15 second “condo bad 2AC,” the affirmative team should be prepared to credibly and coherently explain why the negative’s introduction of multiple (sometimes contradictory) conditional worlds deserves punishment via the ballot. Perhaps equally important, however, is a judge’s willingness to take a stand against negative flexibility’s most destructive manifestations. Especially in meaningful debates and at post-season tournaments, judges seem to be anti-receptive to affirmative theory arguments in an effort to judge as normally [sic] as possible.

I don’t want to make it sound as though status quo negative bias is entirely a structural problem—there are things of which affirmative teams could and should be doing more. First, comparative impact assessment—especially in the 2AC and 1AR—seems to have become something of a lost art. As a judge, it is frustrating to see a second affirmative speaker spend two minutes refuting 1NC attacks on the case and then elect not to weigh the impacts of the case against the negative’s disadvantages. While the aforementioned internal link problems with many negative disadvantages could be part of affirmative impact comparisons, the 2AC and 1AR need to compare the impacts of the case against the impacts of the disadvantages. There are many different schools of thought on the best way to engage in impact calculus, so I won’t delve too deeply into this particular subset of the discussion—but it suffices to say that explaining the “timeframe, probability, and magnitude” of your

impacts is only helpful if you compare them against similar negative’s claims. Second, there are certain arguments that the 1AR simply *cannot afford* to concede. Among others, “disad turns the case,” “plan would be rolled back,” and impact-framing claims like “nuclear war doesn’t cause extinction—only global warming does” are arguments that need to be identified and answered explicitly. Finally, the affirmative must be willing to challenge the “offense/defense” paradigm. Too often, debaters believe and judges decide that “there’s always a risk” of the disadvantage—that logical and well-explained defensive arguments are insufficient to mitigate the risk of the impact. Woodward Academy’s Bill Batterman has discussed this issue at a level deeper than this article allows (<http://www.the3nr.com/2009/05/08/the-meaning-of-offensedefense-theres-only-a-risk/>), but affirmative teams would benefit greatly from challenging the “offense/defense” impact-framing often advanced by the negative and using their defensive arguments to undermine the importance of offensive negative arguments.

Three years ago, I was in attendance at MBA’s Southern Bell Forum with two of my students from Sheboygan North High School, WI. An alum and former debater who lived in the area had met us at the tournament to meet the students and help out for the weekend. After a very successful high school and collegiate debate career, he had been away from the community for approximately a decade. He found interesting a number of debate’s new developments and was perhaps more surprised about how little had changed. However, I will *never* forget how surprised he was when—after winning the flip before the octafinal debate—we chose to be negative. He was even

more surprised when he realized that *most* of the teams that had won the flip before the octafinal round had also decided against defending the resolution. We grabbed a bite to eat and he explained to me that in the early-to-mid 90s (*his* day), choosing to be negative in elimination rounds was virtually unheard of. It left me wondering what had changed in the intervening ten years to flip debate’s side bias.

Debate teaches debaters to decide. The switch-sides model in particular is perhaps the most pedagogically-sound strategy available to America’s high school students. Unfortunately, the current trend toward negative leniency threatens the integrity and educational benefits that debaters and coaches have worked for decades to preserve. For the most part, the solution to the crisis in competitive equity identified herein lies with the debaters—affirmative teams must strive to press the negative’s internal link chains, fight the war against negative terrorism, and pay special attention to negative arguments that are slayers when conceded. Judging, too, will play a vital role in the transition. While it would obviously be inappropriate for judges to *actively intervene* against negative teams, they *should* heighten their skepticism of negative internal-link chains and resist delivering oral critiques that include phrases like “there’s only a risk...” In the short-term, I imagine affirmative teams will have to work harder than what *should* be necessary to restore competitive equity—but that seems like a small price to pay for the long-term sustainability of the activity. ■

Jon Voss is the Assistant Director of Debate at Glenbrook South High School (IL) and coach of the 2009-2010 NFL National Policy Debate Champions from Whitney Young Magnet High School. Any questions or comments may be directed to jvoss@glenbrook225.org.